A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 27

Never did A-4D cease to cause mischief wherever he went. The medical droid came down from *Invisible Hand* to replace Grievous's EMP-fried leg, something he was absolutely not happy with.

"I can almost smell the Wookiee stink, master," the droid complained, as he worked on Grievous in the shelter of their Palsaang headquarters. "And all the shed hair! It's disgusting!"

"Shut up," Grievous said. "The other droids are looking at you."

"How can I, in these conditions?" A-4D went on. "This is abysmal, I'm worried I'm going to get Wookiee dandruff in my joints. How could you drag me down here?"

"You're making a scene," hissed Grievous.

"Oh, *I'm* making a scene?" cried A-4D. "It's always my fault with you! Why can't you ever think how I feel, master?"

Khan and the other staff droids were looking on, though Grievous imagined most of them lacked the capacity for amusement. Still, he couldn't help but remember an embarrassing event many years ago, when one of his wives had scolded him in public. His skin would have crawled in disgust, if he had any significant amount left, comparing A-4D to one of his wives. The droid had none of their strength or honor.

An interesting message had come to Grievous: *Vos goes rogue, Republic camp search for him.* The note had been delivered through the Office of Information and Safety's back channels, and Clothar Aclinde promptly confirmed it was genuine. He'd managed to find a Wookiee drowning in gambling debts and turn him to the Separatist cause, with plentiful and discrete financial aid. *Seeking out Aclinde was the best decision I've made yet in this war,* Grievous thought, in that moment.

"Jedi Master Quinlan Vos has disappeared from Kachirho," Grievous told his droids and organic officers. "Be vigilant. He will be coming to kill me, and I mean to kill him when he does."

"We can't fight a Jedi," Colonel Oro Dassyne said.

"No, and you should not," Grievous agreed. "But once he appears, don't let him out of your sights."

So began the tense waiting game. A-4D remained on hand, in case the worst happened, and fastidiously cleaned out a room for his work. His obsessive behavior and Grievous's tolerance for his back-talk were of great interest to Khan. "If I spoke to you like that, sir, I would lose my head," Khan noted.

"Yes, you would," Grievous told him. "Because you are not my doctor."

"Are physicians respected on Kalee?" asked Khan.

"I-" Grievous paused, narrowing his eyes. "I do not remember. And what do you know of Kalee?"

"Nothing more than what is in the official records, sir. I am attempting to replicate the organic phenomenon known as curiosity. How did I do?"

If my droids aren't idiots, they're freaks, Grievous thought. "You are just as annoying as the them," he told Khan.

"Acknowledged, sir."

For two days, there was no sign of the Jedi. Grievous focused on the battle in the forest. The compacted roads were finally complete, he began landing AATs and MTTs to supplement the NR-N99 tank droids and various spider and tri-droids. On the third day, his encirclement operation began, taking the Republic by surprise. The heavy foliage of Kashyyyk's woodlands had obscured the construction of the impromptu roads to the Republic's flanks, and their leadership hadn't been thinking creatively enough to anticipate such an attack. *The Jedi are terrible strategists,* Grievous thought. *Who put them in charge of the armies, anyway?*

On the third night, Palsaang had an intruder.

The flight back – Esera almost considered the flight *home* – to Raxus had been quiet and uneventful. Harak Murshida, the exiled Skakoan Cyber Guard turned hermit and healer, slept most of the voyage through Hutt Space, cloaked and silent. The dark side presence was so stifling that Esera had to put the ship down on the oceanic planet Carnovia for the better part of a day, though. She went for a long walk around the island they'd landed on, enjoying the warm, tropical downpour scouring the island, clearing her mind and soul of the dark presence. Murshida had found a dry spot under a cliff to continue his

sleep. After that, the journey resumed, thirty six hours from start to finish, counting the stop on Carnovia, which took almost as long as the flight itself. The Hutt hyperlanes were so much quicker, no wonder the Republic could shuffle its fleets around so quickly.

Not quickly enough, though. As they passed through Hutt Space, Esera tuned into regional holonet broadcasts. There was a Republic fleet stranded in orbit of Nar Shaddaa, completely out of fuel. Another was stalled at Ubrikkia, waiting for reinforcements to arrive, most of which were stuck at Lieutenant Voyan and Iaco Stark's beloved Druckenwell, also trying to find fuel. Right about the time *Scimitar* crossed into Confederate-held space, Esera heard the fleet at Nar Shaddaa had consolidated all its fuel into what ships it could and sent them on to Ubrikkia, freeing up that task force to join the fray.

What a mess, thought Esera. There was irony to be found that the same fleets that had fought pirates and raiders for generations were now using the same tactics on their foes. The extent of Grievous's offensive was revealed when they reached Raxus: the defensive blockade was gone. Hardly a single warship remained in orbit, including the one she was looking for. *Encounter* wasn't above Raxus... *Encounter* was above the other Raxus. The Raxus no one talked about.

Generations ago, Raxus Prime had been as beautiful a planet as Raxus Secundus, or even more beautiful, some said. The warlord Xim had made it one of his empire's throne worlds, at the dawn of interstellar civilization. Now, Raxus Prime was a world-spanning junk heap, filled with derelict factories, non-unionized shipbreakers, and illicit salvage operations. The planet was in such sorry shape that even a clan of Jawas had moved in a few decades ago. "Why are you here, *Encounter?*" Esera asked. R8 blinked his eye, and Murshida stirred in his seat, shaken from sleep by the exit from hyperspace.

"Raxus Prime?" he asked. "I've never heard of it."

"You probably haven't heard of anything this far from Skako," said Esera. "We're in the capital system of the Confederacy."

"Is *Encounter* your ship?"

"Uh... Kind of..." Esera explained how she'd used *Encounter* on her mission to Zyggeria, then again when she and Voyan got way too close to a black hole.

"You flew down a black hole?" asked Murshida, arms crossed and head tilted. The Skakoan's body language made his incredulity as clear as any facial expression.

"Only to within twelve kilometers of the event horizon, and we only partially lost the relativistic shield," Esera said. She wasn't going to tell him how scared she'd been. Jedi didn't feel fear, after all.

"Madness, simply madness," Murshida said.

"So, *Encounter* isn't really my ship. She technically belongs to Khan's fleet, but she's so messed up that she needs to be scrapped or completely overhauled. I owe Khan a new destroyer. Since I asked Lieutenant Voyan to fix her up... that's what he's been doing for nearly a month now, all on his own apparently."

"A respectable sense of dedication," remarked the Skakoan. He heaved himself to his feet, groaning. "I can barely move my knees. I hope they have arthritis medication on the nicer Raxus."

"I'm sure they do," said Esera. Murshida was a powerful warrior, of that there was no doubt. But he was past his prime, of that too there was no doubt. Skakoans usually lived to a hundred years of age, and Murshida was seventy-two. During the voyage, Esera discovered that retirement age on Skako was eighty for civilians, sixty-five for combat personnel like Murshida. *Wow, an expired Cyber Guard took down a whole clone platoon,* thought Esera, before remembering every Human down there had been suffering from progressively worse nitrogen narcosis. How good would he be without that advantage?

Scimitar approached *Encounter,* and was greeted by the battle droid commander running the destroyer. They were cleared for landing in the same little hangar Esera's shuttle had landed in, the first time she visited. When the two stepped off their ship, R8 rolling down the ramp behind them, they were greeted by the strangest music playing on the intercom. Bizarre electronic noises had been put to a decent synthetic bass line, at least in her opinion, and the lyrics were sung in a language she couldn't identify. It sounded like something that should have been playing in the background of a nightclub, based on her entirely theoretical knowledge of such places.

"What is going on here?" wondered Murshida. Not only was there weird music playing for all to hear, but the hangar was filled with so much junk that *Scimitar* had barely found space to land. Even the ship's own shuttle was almost buried.

"Lieutenant Voyan is a little strange," Esera said. "I'm sure he's around here somewhere."

Encounter was in an even worse state than Esera had left it a month ago. Almost every panel had been torn off the walls, discarded throughout the corridors, exposing the machinery. Esera didn't know much about the inner workings of ships, but it didn't look good.

"Hey you," she said to a drone, "where is Lieutenant Voyan?"

The drone turned down another hall, and moved off; Esera and Murshida followed. This hall was even more chaotic, the lights were off, replaced by portable lamps, and large portions of the power conduits had been torn out of the wall. A steady stream of repair drones were coming and going with bits and pieces of *stuff*, like insects of a hive. The music on the intercom changed, to a peppy song about romance of all things. *Is Voyan using the intercom to play music?*

"Why are the ceilings so low?" Murshida grumbled, ducking under a bulkhead as they stepped through a hatch.

"This ship was built specifically for a Gossam crew," Esera said. "They're very short. I like it though, it makes me feel tall."

"I don't see why that matters."

"You try being this small in a galaxy full of huge people," muttered Esera. They carried on down the hall. After another turn, they saw the lieutenant. Voyan was singing, off-key and out of tune, but he didn't care. Human and Skakoan looked at each other. Murshida made to speak, but Esera put her hand on his shoulder. A feeling she'd never felt before was emanating from the mechanic-engineer. He was *happy*. Genuinely happy. The dreary resignation from Khan's ship was gone, the agitation and anxiety from Zygerria were gone, the tense uncomfortableness of the days leading up to the black hole incident was gone. This was a man who was enjoying life. He wore a welding mask, he had a fusion cutter in his hands, and he was cutting out the power conduit in even slices, letting each one drop straight into the waiting arms of the repair drones, like an assembly line being run backwards.

"*Wohoah, I'm walking on air, I'm walking on air because you've answered my pray*AH!" Voyan's voice turned into a horrified squawk mid-lyric as he noticed he was no longer alone, which shortly changed into a cry of surprise and alarm as he took a step backwards and tripped over a repair drone. He crashed to the floor, knocking over one of the portable lamps, which fell across him.

Esera put a hand over her eyes and sighed. Murshida laughed, deep and loud. R8 made a disappointed whistling sound.

"Lieutenant, the ship's intercom is not your personal music player," Esera said.

Voyan sat up, shoving the lamp off himself and taking off the welding mask, face red. He tapped at a datapad and the intercom went dead. "What are *you* doing here and who is that?" asked he.

"You didn't think I was giving you this ship, did you?" Esera asked in turn. "I still intend to use *Encounter*, since you're actually fixing her up like I asked. I think. And this is Harak Murshida, formerly of the Skako Cyber Guard."

"Skakoan? Oh no," groaned Voyan. "I don't want any Techno Union ridiculousness happening here under my watch-"

"The Cyber Guard is not affiliated with the Techno Union," Murshida said. "Neither am I."

"I see." Voyan's eyes narrowed. All the happiness from a moment ago had fled away, replaced with a cold suspicion towards the alien and a confounded sense of curiosity towards Esera.

"So, do you want to tell me why my ship looks even worse than before?" asked Esera.

"What you see is a result of cleaning *Encounter*'s wounds. The dead parts had to be cleared to make way for new parts. Or re-purposed." Voyan gestured around at the mess in the hall. "I know what I'm doing isn't pretty, but there's a whole planet of free supplies down there. It works, trust me."

"That's all I can ask," said Esera. "How are repairs going?"

"You missed the real fun part, replacing engine two and the entire hyperdrive section, that was a nightmare I could do a ten hour documentary on. I had to detach both engines one and three for that. I've got good relations with the shipbreakers of Raxus Prime now. About a week ago I started on everything else. With the upgraded drone coding, I've made decent progress. Most of the work is drafting instructions and gathering the right materials, they've done most of the heavy labor," Voyan said. He waved his fusion cutter at the conduit. "But sometimes, if I want something done right, I have to do it myself."

"And the music?"

Voyan looked the other way. "No one but me was here, why not?"

Esera smirked. "Let me guess, something you picked up back on Druckenwell?"

"Yeah," said Voyan. "As far as I knew no one was coming back for *Encounter*. I hadn't heard anything from anyone anywhere since my transfer. It's been like I stopped existing to the galaxy beyond Raxus Prime. I've gotten to know *Encounter* pretty well, it's just been she and I."

"Well, here we are," Esera said. "By the way, I'm your commanding officer now."

"You've always acted like that," said Voyan. "Planning on having me strangled by Zygerrians again?"

Time to mess with him a little, thought Esera. "What I mean is, Grievous promoted me to captain," she said, trying not to smirk too much. "Formally, I outrank you. Please call me Captain Komara from now on."

"Captain?" echoed Voyan.

"Yes, captain," said Esera. "I'm here to take command of this ship, and as a member of this ship's crew, you answer to me."

Voyan stared at her, a stony look on his face, as those words sunk in. It started slowly, a flicker of anger within his heart, before exploding into a seething rage, that Esera felt through the Force like a blazing bonfire. Even Murshida shifted back on his feet. The muscles on the left side of Voyan's face began to twitch. Esera had expected *a* reaction from the lieutenant, but not this bad of one.

"Twelve years of my life gone, and not a damn thing to show for it... and you get made a captain three months after changing sides," he said, his free hand clenching and unclenching. "Fine. Have your ship. You can have my resignation too."

"Whoa, hold on," said Esera, raising her hands. *Where did this come from?* She could feel that rage wasn't aimed at her explicitly, maybe that's why she'd just been blindsided. "You're good at what you do, Lieutenant, I need you here."

"No," Voyan said. He let his fusion cutter fall from his hands, but it was caught by the next repair drone waiting on him. "I've had it with this institution, *Captain* Komara. I've had it with being pushed around. A man's got to stand up."

That was all Voyan had to say, and he brushed past the two without another word. Murshida watched him go down the hall. "He seemed so happy a moment ago." R8 chirped in agreement.

"He *was*..." said Esera. "I didn't expect him to blow up like that. It's like a switch got flipped in his head. Like I said, he's a strange guy. All engineers are, right?"

"Right," agreed Murshida.

"I'm gonna go after him-"

"Don't," Murshida said. "If Human males are like Skakoan males, he needs time to cool off. A few hours should do it. But I think there's more at play here than just jealousy. That was only a catalyst."

"Yeah, I get the feeling it's deeper than that, too. Unless he's getting shot at, he's usually level-headed about everything," said Esera. "Right, I'll talk with him later."

"By the way, I'd like to go to Raxus Secundus and get something for my knees. But I can't fly your ship."

Esera sighed again. "Why can nothing be easy?"

"You are well on your way to a full recovery," the medical droid told Obi-wan. "Keep up your physical training and you'll have your muscle mass back soon."

"Excellent, thank you," Obi-wan said. His long imprisonment on *Invisible Hand* had left his limbs weak and atrophied from constant shackling, and therefore he was stuck at the Temple until the medical unit declared him fit for combat again, even as the largest battle of the war raged at Kashyyyk.

Every day, a new Jedi seemed to arrive for care under the healers and droids, brought in burnt or maimed or crippled in some distant battle. Yesterday's arrival had been Ardabur Aspar, his face badly burned and a lightsaber-cauterized stab wound straight through his right lung. By all rights, that should have killed him, but his will to survive was just that powerful. Obi-wan had heard his name before, though he'd never talked to the man. That would change today.

As it turned out, he wasn't the only one with that idea. Aspar was constrained to his bed, face entirely bandaged up, hooked up to various machines monitoring his vitals. Sitting to the side was one of the Temple Guard, a Pau'an.

"Master Kenobi," Aspar said, turning to face him, despite his eyes being bandaged over. He sounded hoarse, and his voice was weak.

"Hello there," said Obi-wan. "I don't believe we've ever met, face to face."

"And we still haven't, Master." Aspar pointed to his bandages.

Obi-wan tried not to chuckle. This young Jedi had his sense of humor. "I hope I'm not intruding," he said, looking to the Pau'an. *What is his name?* He hated to admit it, but he didn't know any of the Temple Guard. Loners were naturally drawn to them, and the Guards tended to be deadly serious about their solemn life mission.

"Not at all," Aspar said, sensing Obi-wan's feelings. That was one of the nice perks of living with Jedi, mutual understandings were easier to reach. "This is Gion Caraf, one of our ever vigilant Temple Guards."

"There is no need for flattery," the Pau'an said. "Well met, Master Kenobi."

Obi-wan nodded to him. "Do you two know each other?"

"We came to the Temple in the same year," Aspar said.

"Ardabur Aspar and I trained together often, before the war," said Caraf. "I came to lend him my support in the healing process."

"Very kind of you," Obi-wan said. "The Council has assigned me for your debriefing, Aspar. It seems you had another run-in with the Dark Jedi, Esera Komara."

"The Force works in mysterious ways, Master Kenobi," Aspar sighed. "We'll finish our talk later, Caraf, if you'd please?" The Pau'an nodded, stood, and bowed, before taking his leave. When he was gone, Aspar spoke again. "Is there more you'd like to know that wasn't in my report, Master Kenobi?"

"I must confess, I only skimmed it," said Obi-wan. "Why don't you start from the top?"

Obligingly, Aspar told his whole story. Republic Intelligence had been notified a Separatist agent calling herself Esera had contacted Padme Amidala on Naboo. Aspar and his troops had just so happened to be nearby, through a twist of fate. They'd landed in Theed, fearing they were too late to arrest the fugitive, but they'd managed to catch her just as she was about to make an escape in a mysterious star courier that, officially, didn't exist. "That was strange, Master," Aspar said. "This ship was unidentified, it had no serial codes, it wasn't even in the registry of any private holders based on Naboo. The company who owned the hangars is run out of Coruscant, though. I was hoping to investigate further once I'd brought Komara in, but..." Again, Aspar pointed to the bandages.

"Yes, that's a bit of an impediment. Do go on," Obi-wan said.

The wounded knight continued his summary. He'd cornered Esera Komara in the hangar, and was slowly beating her back despite her use of the dark side. "I used a concentration-breaking strategy on her, I tried to get Komara to remember her past as a Jedi doing good for the Republic, and honoring her deceased master's memory," he said. It had worked, enough for him to break her defenses and lightly wound her. However, Komara's droid had attacked him by spraying him with flaming oil. "That little droid's attack cost me most of my face," said Aspar.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Obi-wan, not really sure of what else he could say about that.

"It could be worse, at least it doesn't hurt," Aspar said. "That's what's nice about these second and third degree burns, not many nerves are left. I will be hideously disfigured, but no sacrifice is too great to defend our Republic."

"Well, you certainly are staying positive about all this," Obi-wan said. "No one can fault you there. But this wasn't the end of your encounter with Komara?"

"Oh no," said Aspar. "I tracked her to a primitive planet not far from Naboo next. You see, even as my face burned off, I managed to throw a tracking device on the hull of the ship..." Aspar recounted how he'd followed her there once his ship's medics had treated his facial wounds. He took a squad of clones down to the surface, where they found a Skakoan and his ship. Aspar had attempted to negotiate peacefully, but the Skakoan was uncooperative and would not let himself be detained for questioning. "It was at this time that Komara came out of hiding. This ship she'd stolen, it had a cloaking device! Imagine that!"

"On a ship that small?" Obi-wan stroked his beard. "No wonder she was after it."

Aspar explained the fight; he spoke of the Skakoan's surprising combat capability, and how he and Komara had eventually bested Aspar as both Humans succumbed to the high pressure atmosphere. "It was totally breathable, but the pressure compressed the gasses we were breathing..."

"And they interfered with your nervous system. Nitrogen narcosis," said Obi-wan.

"Exactly. It never even occurred to me that could happen in air, not just underwater. This is why you're the Master, Kenobi, and I'm just a Knight." Aspar did his best to shrug while laying in a bed.

"So, Komara and this Skakoan left you to die?" Obi-wan asked. *Or did they spare your life?*

"As far as I can tell, yes," said Aspar. "They left my lying there, got in that ship, and flew off. I'm lucky one of my clones sent out a distress signal."

"And just to be clear here, Komara was still using the dark side?"

"Yes." Aspar nodded. In the Force, Obi-wan felt no hint of deception. But something still didn't add up here. He hadn't felt deception from Komara either, aboard *Invisible Hand*. Something Ahsoka had said set her off into the dark side. And that dark side presence vanished as quickly as it had come. *What's going on here? Someone's lying to me, but who?* He didn't believe Komara could have deluded herself into thinking her version of events was true. The dark side hadn't been nearly strong enough in her for her to reach that level of self-delusion.

"You and Komara served together on Shumavar for several months, didn't you?" asked Obi-wan.

"We did," said Aspar.

"Did she ever have any inclination of dark side tendencies?"

"At the time, I would have said absolutely not. But she always had a soft spot for the Separatists. She never wanted to actually fight them, you see. Komara lacked the will to make hard choices. She always wanted to take an easy way out..." Aspar shook his head at a memory privy only to him. "Looking back, I'm not surprised at all. The dark side is the easiest way out."

"Why would someone who didn't want to fight turn to the dark side..." Obi-wan mused. "Komara's fall makes about as much sense as Barris Offee's."

"It's like you masters always say. The dark side has clouded everything. What once was unthinkable becomes reasonable, when your mind is twisted like that. You and I, Master, we remember the Force before it became so clouded. The young ones, like Offee and Komara, all they've ever known is this shadow over everything." Aspar went quiet for a short while. His voice had been getting progressively weaker as he spoke, though his conviction never let up. "Master Kenobi, I did give a report on my past with Komara already. If you want to know more, I would appreciate it if you read that first before asking any more questions. I mean no disrespect, but..." He waved his hand around the room. "I am not exactly well at the moment."

"Of course, I understand," Obi-wan said.

With that, he left the medical unit, and went to reflect on what he'd learned. It was a shame all of Komara's acquaintances from her youngling days were dead. The war had a heavy toll. *Wait a second,* Obi-wan thought. *Only younglings who went on to become padawans are likely to have died in the war. What about those who didn't?* Obi-wan made his way to the archives, to check the records of the Jedi Service Corps.

"Here they come again, sir," OOM-27 announced.

"Do they realize how futile it is?" wondered Kronaak, watching the oncoming Star Destroyers.

"I don't think so, sir."

"Clearly." Four times now, the Republic fleet in very low orbit of the icy gas giant Kuhurrik had tried to make a break for interplanetary space. Four times now, Kronaak's fleet had pushed them back down, further into the atmosphere each time. *They're desperate now,* Kronaak thought. All the other Republic fleets in the system were caught up in their own battles, there was no help coming to this isolated force. "Launch all fighters and bombers, let's finish this," said Kronaak.

"Roger, roger."

Swarms of Vulture droids and Hyena droids departed from the cavernous hangars of the *Lucrehulk*-class battleships in Kronaak's fleet, his own *Aethra* among them. Wave after wave of droids had wore down the fighter squadrons aboard the Star Destroyers, just as attempt after attempt at getting out of orbit had burned through the hypermatter reserves aboard the Republic ships. In a normal battle, this wouldn't have been a problem. The only reason it was now, was because these ships had been running close to empty when they arrived in the system.

The V-wings and ARC-170s put up a valiant fight, but Kronaak had kept them on their toes for thirty-six hours now, even clones needed sleep. They must have resorted to some kind of stimulant, as the Republic fighters were more erratic than before.

"Sir," OOM-27 reported, "Rear Admiral Helnurath is reporting new contacts in his sector."

"What are they?" asked Kronaak.

"Tankers and escorts, sir."

"Pull off the fighters and bombers, send them after the supply ships!" The Republic admiral must have known what he was up to, as the clone pilots veered off after them. Kronaak pointed his walking stick at the Star Destroyers below. "Take us in, we'll deal with them ourselves."

"Roger, roger."

The Confederate ships began to descend, just as the Republic fleet made a break for high orbit. *Aethra*'s six escorting *Recusant*s blasted ahead with the cruisers and other destroyers Kronaak had gathered up. His most delicate ships, the frigates, stayed back and pummeled the Star Destroyers with their oversized prow turbolasers. "What are our readings on their shields?" asked Kronaak.

"Under strain, sir," said OOM-27. "It isn't just the turbolasers, it's the atmospheric friction too."

During the fleet battles in Core, in the previous year, the Confederate Navy had developed a tactic of massed fire. No individual Separatist ship was capable of matching the irksome *Venator*, but when multiple ships targeted a single Star Destroyer, they got results. Of course, when multiple Star Destroyers targeted a single Separatist ship, they got the same results, even quicker. *Why do we bother armoring our ships if well never be able to afford enough armor for it to matter?* Kronaak often wondered. *Why not just take all that armor mass, remove it, and put in more powerful shield capacitors?*

But such questions would have to wait. Kronaak's battleship line tilted to bring a full broadside to bear on the Republic ships below, as his frigates hung like daggers high above them. The Star Destroyers's shields glowed vibrant blue as they lit up. The closer they got, the more focused the Separatist turbolaser fire became. "They can't take much more of this," Kronaak said.

"The first Star Destroyer has lost shields," said OOM-27. "Now another, and another-"

"I get it." Kronaak scuttled forward to the view screen. "What will you do now?" he asked the line of Republic ships, as the lead Star Destroyer was blasted out of orbit. Power failing, its nose tilted down to obey the gravity well's path of least resistance. The Star Destroyer began to fall into the atmosphere, orange flames licking the edges of the hull as it pushed up against the atmospheric particles below. A cloud of escape pods began leaving the ship.

"Shall we target them, sir?"

"No," said Kronaak. The escape pods didn't have enough power to make escape velocity. In a few days, they'd all be dragged back down into the dark depths of the icy gas giant. "Keep firing at the other ships."

One by one, the shields on the Star Destroyers failed, their reactors running on fumes and capacitors already overheated from a day and a half spent at orbital velocities in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Their captains chose to put whatever power they had left into the engines, gaining a few dozen more kilometers of altitude to give the escape pods a fighting chance to be rescued.

"Sir, we're being hailed," OOM-27 announced.

"On screen."

The circular view screen at the front of the bridge rippled, as the image of a Republic admiral appeared, a haggard and dazed looking Human with weary sunken eyes. "This is Admiral Wurtz. I am announcing my fleet's unconditional surrender."

"And I, Rear Admiral Kronaak of the Confederacy, accept," said Kronaak, tapping his walking stick on the floor. "Cease fire, Commander," he told the battle droid.

"Roger, roger."

Wurtz nodded once, and the screen went blank. Within the next three minutes, half the Star Destroyers remaining began to lose power as their reactors went offline. Escape pods were launching by the thousands, under the watchful eyes of Separatist gunners, being tractor beamed aboard the Confederate ships. Wurtz and his crew were brought aboard *Aethra* itself, as Kronaak had impromptu prisoner camps set up in the inner hangars of the ring and hangars of the core ship. Fitting almost eight thousand peoplein *Aethra*'s minor hangars was going to prove troublesome, but they would only be there until Eemon's freighters and tankers could make their next visit.

With the battle over at last, Kronaak allowed his fleet time to rest and repair. His handful of organic officers aboard the other ships would need down time, the repair drones would simply need time to do their work. He decided to pay Wurtz a visit in person, with a squad of commando droids for extra intimidation factor, if being a two and a half meter tall crustaceanoid alien with claws that could crush bones effortlessly didn't scare the Humans enough.

Kronaak arrived at the equatorial hangar in the coreship, with his escort behind him. The clone marines and pilots of Wurtz's ship had kept their discipline, they set up an orderly camp with sleeping areas and queue for the washroom. The Human officers had just dropped wherever their legs gave out on them, rumpled uniforms and heavy slumber a testament to the thirty-six hours they'd just been through. Wurtz himself was holding together, but clearly at the end of his rope. He looked ready to drop too.

"Rear Admiral Kronaak," Wurtz said, standing to attention. "It is... an honor to meet you in person." He was a small man, well under two meters, middle-aged and stocky, his skin pockmarked by some disease in years passed and scorched by the sun of whatever distant world he hailed from. Iron-grey hair peeked out from under his cap.

"Admiral Wurtz," said Kronaak, tapping his walking stick on the hangar floor once. "I apologize for the lack of accommodations, but this is a warship in a war zone. You are, quite frankly, of secondary importance."

"I understand," said Wurtz. "If I might ask, what is to become of my crew?"

"They will be transferred to a prisoner of war camp on Karkaris when the next supply convoy arrives, in five days time." Kronaak looked over the prisoners. Eight thousand was a big number, but they were scattered through the secondary hangars and had no way to communicate.

"Karkaris... that's a water planet."

"Yes, it is," said Kronaak. "But there are a number of volcanic islands above the surface. I understand the prison camps there have no fences or towers, the global ocean does it all for them. It's never below thirty degrees, either. I understand Humans are best adapted for such warm climates?"

"A tropical vacation does sound nice, after all this," said Wurtz, with a dark smile. "I do admit, I was worried you were just going to leave us to die out here. Or torture us for information."

"It's not too late, if you'd prefer we go that way," Kronaak said.

Wurtz yawned. "If you're going to torture anyone, take me. I'm too tired to care. But leave my men and women out of it."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Esera spent her whole day taking Harak Murshida to Raxus Secundus, helping him navigate the city she was starting to know so well, and finding Skakoan-compatible medicine for his joint pain. Murshida had also insisted on buying Skakoan-compatible fruits and vegetables; the towering warrior in silver armor and crimson red robes had received no end of staring at the upper class supermarket Esera had taken him to. After that, Murshida had gone off looking for tanks of methane, and after sheepishly asking to borrow money from Esera, ordered a spherical pressure chamber the size of a small house from an industrial equipment manufacturer. Charity was in the Jedi Code, wasn't it?

"I will have it installed on your ship," he said. "I will be able to live in there without a pressure suit."

"You're just inviting yourself aboard?" asked Esera.

"Yes," said Murshida. "You got my last home blown up."

"Yeah, that's fair," Esera said, nodding. "Whatever you need, just ask it, I owe you that much."

"Speaking of, I will remain here until everything is ready. There is a guesthouse here for Skakoans away from home, serving exiles and expatriates. I think I shall go give them a scare."

Esera wished she could see their reactions to one of the Cyber Guard turning up announced. By what she'd gathered, they were no ordinary soldiers. After that, she had returned to *Encounter*. Esera had left instructions for the droids not to let Miha Voyan off the ship, though it turned out there had been no need for that. The mechanic-engineer remained in his cabin, and that was where Esera found him.

"Hey, lieutenant," she said, knocking on the hatch. It opened, and there was Voyan. The anger from earlier had burned out of him, now he was back to his usual carefully-controlled self.

"Yes, captain?" he asked.

"We need to talk."

"Very well," Voyan said. He opened the hatch wider, and stepped aside.

Oh, I'm being invited in, Esera realized, after a moment of uncomprehending. Voyan's quarters were sparse. Whereas Esera had taken up residency in the commanding officer's quarters, the lieutenant had taken a mere ensign's cabin, a single room with a tiny washroom attached. He had a sleeping pad on the floor, some boxes along the wall, and a handheld computer terminal. A black flag hung draped across a bulkhead, bearing a white geometric skull circled by ancient Tionese writing. The lieutenant sat cross-legged on his sleeping pad, waiting for her to speak. *Everyone back at the Temple would approve of his living conditions,* Esera thought. But Voyan wasn't a Jedi, he didn't have to live like this. She knelt down on the bare metal deck.

In the brighter lighting of his cabin, Esera saw just how awful Voyan looked. He'd been pale and exhausted-looking after his trip down to Raxus Prime, before they'd shipped out to Zygerria. Now, he was even worse. He'd gone from pale to nearly grey, looking like he hadn't slept in days, and he definitely hadn't shaved in days either. Voyan smelled faintly of ozone and some other acrid chemical scents, and one of his hands had bacta patches taped to both its palm and back, as if he'd been stabbed through by something. This was not a healthy-looking Human. And now, he wasn't even a happy Human.

"What's with the Xim flag?" asked Esera, pointing to the black banner. The lieutenant tilted his head.

"I'm surprised you recognized that. I didn't think the Jedi would let you get in touch with your heritage."

Heritage? I barely remember my home... "It's not original, is it?"

"Of course not, I'm not rich," said Voyan. "It's a reproduction I bought from a woman on Argai. I keep that as a reminder, that valor and justice can prevail against evil."

"Uh..." *Valor and justice? Fighting against evil? Xim?* Xim the Despot had been a brutal warlord exterminating anyone who didn't submit to him, thousands of years ago, long before the Sith Empire or even the Republic reached the Tion cluster. Her history classes in the Jedi Temple had taught her all about the barbarity and savagery of the ancient Tionese, her ancestors. They'd only been stopped by the Hutt Empire and an alliance of Core worlds. "If I recall, Xim died a slave in the dungeons of the Hutts. After killing millions in his conquests."

"Xim died at Vontor, stabbed in the back by faithless traitors." Voyan gave her a pointed glare. "Despite the war, Doctor Harand has been putting out some very interesting research. He's made a convincing argument that the Ash Worlds are the long-lost Kiirium Reaches, utterly destroyed by a genocide committed by the Hutts and since covered up. Typical, right?"

"Right..." Esera didn't want to get into this, but she did have a vague recollection of something important happening in the darkest days of winter. "I'd love to talk history, but I've got something else in mind. I see you've been busy," said Esera.

"Yes. You told me to fix this ship, I'm fixing her."

"But you didn't think I'd be coming back for her?"

"I was starting to think you weren't, after a month," said Voyan. "As far as I was concerned, I'd been forgotten, and was being left to my own devices. I was happy with that situation."

"Is that what your problem is?" Esera asked.

"I have several problems, captain. Which one?"

"Your resignation, lieutenant."

Voyan was exasperated, but as usual, was not physically showing it. "*That* problem. Yes, I am trying to resign," he said. "If my eight years of service mean so little to this fleet, I see no reason to stay here."

"I can understand if you're jealous-"

"I'm a lot more than jealous, captain," said Voyan. "I'm angry. I'm furious. I'm ready to go home and shoot every spice-slinging alien scum I see."

At least he's reserving his anti-alien feelings for the ones who ought to be shot, Esera thought. "You don't think I deserve this rank?"

"On the contrary," Voyan said. "While I am angry that I spent four years in education and eight years in the fleet just to get ordered around by a schoolgirl with a lasersword, I could live with that. That schoolgirl with a lasersword overthrew a slave empire, conquered a sector, and saved my life on at least two occasions. I can't doubt your loyalty or your dedication to the cause. You deserve that rank, Captain Komara, absolutely. Wear it with pride."

Schoolgirl with a lasersword!? Esera blushed a little at that. "I'm sorry, but if that's the case, I don't see why you're so upset."

Voyan exhaled, and closed his eyes. For a while, he was silent, and Esera let him take his time to find his words. When he spoke again, he went a different direction than what Esera expected: "Do you know what it's like, to grow up as a stranger in your own land?"

"No," said Esera. What did this have to do with his problem?

"Then how could you understand why I've made this choice, Captain Komara?"

"I don't need to understand to listen to you."

That did the trick, because the lieutenant's shoulders slumped as the fight went out of him. "I always thought, once I got out into the Galaxy, maybe things would be better. Maybe it's only my planet that's a hellhole ruled by Hutts and their cartels. Maybe, just maybe, if I got out of there, things would be okay, things would be different, things would be fair. Just the kind of stupid thinking you'd expect from an idiot like me."

You're definitely not an idiot, thought Esera. The fact that they weren't on the wrong side of an event horizon was testament to that.

"And what did I discover, when I got out here? After a lifetime of being treated like dirt by a bunch of off-world invaders, who got rich off our hard work by destroying our families and communities with the filth and vices they peddled? *I'm* the bad guy, Captain Komara. I'm a Human, I'm keeping everyone who isn't Human down. And of course, only an idiot like me would have signed onto the Trade Federation after the Nemoidians took over. They delighted in taking revenge on me, for things I'd never had any part in. Things I couldn't have taken part in, because-" Voyan stopped, and glowered at the bulkhead, anger and shame mixing together around him. Whatever event he was about to reference, he kept to himself.

"It's the little things, Captain Komara," he went on, his voice dropping. "Twelve years of slights and snubs, being passed over time and again, doing the best I can do only to be screwed over while every one of those smug alien faces smirks and tells me there's nothing that can be done... I've played this rigged game by the rules and gotten *nothing*. Then you sweep in here after a month of silence, the ex-Jedi turncoat with some alien goon at your back, telling me you had Grievous just toss the captain's tabs to you..." He shook his head. "I've been the loser all my life. Well, I'm tired of being the loser. Today was the last straw. I'm not taking any more of this. I'm sorry you're the one who pushed me over the edge, but this was a long time coming."

"Well, then..." said Esera. A lot about the lieutenant made sense now. Especially his attitude towards non-humans. But letting Voyan leave wasn't an option for her. Esera needed *Encounter* and she needed someone dedicated enough to fix the ship up. She thought about the things Aspar had said to her on Naboo, and had an idea of how to reach out to Voyan. If he was going to share his story with her, she'd share hers with him. "If you really want to resign, and go home and start a one-man war with the Hutt cartels, I'll let you. It'd be a waste of talent and life, but I'll let you. But before you go, I want you to hear me out."

"Alright," said Voyan.

"We're not so different, you and I," Esera said. That earned her an unamused look from the mechanic-engineer. *Is this a daytime soap opera on the holonet?* he seemed to be thinking. He was certainly being dramatic enough to land a role in one. "I was the oldest in the group of younglings they brought to the Temple in my year. I didn't know where I was or who these people were, I just wanted to go home. I remember I cried a lot, and asked where my mother and father were. I didn't realize they'd given me away forever to the Jedi. And things... didn't really get better. I was never the strongest, or the fastest, or even the smartest. The only thing I really excelled at was being too quiet to be noticed. I tried my best to hide my fear, but it was always there."

"Aren't you supposed to be emotionless?" asked Voyan.

"Yes, more or less. I'm not good at that, either," Esera said. Maybe admitting some weaknesses would stir his sympathies. "I barely passed my Initiate Trials, I think they let me slip by only because they knew I was going to be beaten by everyone else in the Apprentice Tournament anyway, and someone felt sorry for me. And I was beaten, I was everyone's punching bag. If someone wanted to look good they came and dueled me, it wasn't even a contest most of the time. The masters and knights who came to view the tournament only picked those of us who did well. I didn't get chosen by anyone, obviously. The second tournament came around next year, I was thirteen, it was my last chance. Once again, I was everyone's target of choice since they knew I couldn't fight back well enough to be a threat.

"Predictably, no one chose me, again. I was sure they'd send me off to the Service Corps, which sounded nice, since I wouldn't be expected to fight anyone there. My friend Sanya had already ended up there-" Esera stopped for a moment. *How long has it been since I thought about her?* she wondered, before continuing. "The Force had another plan for me, though. A Jedi master named Olor Callo arrived late, he missed the tournament by a day, but he decided to take me on. I could hear the whispers, I heard how everyone told him I was never going to be anything, that I'd crack under the pressure, that I'd never pass the trials of knighthood..." Even now, going on five years later, she was still hurt by those remarks. Maybe her brain was confused over what hurt more, the constant doubt that she'd amount to anything or the loss of her master, and that was why just saying Master Callo's name out loud hadn't reduced her to tears. "I don't know why he chose to take my as his apprentice. I'll never know. But I'm glad he did. He helped me find what kind of woman I really was. The woman I am today. A life in the Service Corps probably would have fit me better, but without him, I wouldn't be here."

A stretch of of silence passed between the two, before Voyan came to his conclusion: "I'm a guy who's been working for people who hate him his whole life, and you're a girl who wasn't evil enough for a band of psychopathic sorcerers preying on the weak and helpless. We're both losers, that's what you're saying."

Those words about the Jedi stung, bad. *We're not like that!* she wanted to say. From Voyan's point of view, though, that's surely what the Jedi looked like. Emotionless, remorseless magic-using warriors putting down a revolution against an inept, corrupt, and morally bankrupt oligarchy. She refrained from trying to change his mind, this time, and focused on what she'd won.

"Yeah, honestly. We're both losers, Lieutenant. I know how it feels to be passed over, I know how it feels to be on the bottom of a social ladder... I know how it feels to be unwanted. You're not alone." Those last words finally broke Voyan's mask of blankness. He looked troubled, and Esera could feel his resolve melt away into dreary resignation and hopelessness. *That* was the feeling she was used to from this man. *That* feeling was why he remained a loser. *I'll have to beat that attitude out of him!* Esera decided.

"I hate changing my mind," Voyan said. "I meant what I said. I am sick of losing in a game I was never meant to win."

"To hell with that game, and to hell with those people! Stay here, work for me," said Esera. "I know we've had our differences in the past and we don't always get along. But I need someone with your skills, and I can offer you something more meaningful than going off and getting yourself killed by Hutt thugs."

"Yeah?" asked Voyan. Any lingering hostility had vanished from him. *I have you now,* thought Esera.

"Yeah. I came here to make a difference in this awful galaxy, lieutenant. That's what I'm going to do. You can be a part of that, too. Or, you can go die. But I really would like you to stay."

Voyan folded his hands in front of his mouth. "Very well. I will not resign. On one condition."

"Name it."

"One day, I will take this ship to my home planet, and I will liberate it from the Hutt cartels." Voyan looked her in the eyes, but whatever he was thinking eluded Esera. "Promise me, I will have this ship at my disposal."

"I promise it," said Esera. "Is this something that needs to happen sooner than later?"

"No," Voyan said. "There's no one left alive there I care about."

"Um, okay then." Even after all the drama, Voyan was still Voyan, enigmatic as ever, masking his rationality behind a lifeless mask that even Esera struggled to see through. *I wish I could go looking around in his head, to see what makes him tick.* But that power belonged to the dark side. She'd have to do it the hard way, by turning a former enemy into a friend. Esera remembered the last thing he'd said to her aboard *Encounter* after the black hole was that friendship was a waste of time. *Why is nothing easy?* she asked herself again.

"Alright, it's settled," Voyan said. "I'll get back to work."

"Not so fast, lieutenant. You look horrible, you should rest."

Voyan stared at her. "But I've only worked eight hours today," he said. "I need to get back on schedule, I'm supposed to do eighteen a day."

"What?!" Eighteen hours of work a day? That was crazy, as far as Esera was concerned! "Do you even sleep?"

"Four hours of sleep a night. Eighteen hours of work a day. Two hours for making food while on breaks." Lieutenant Voyan made it sound like the most natural thing in the world. "It's been a highly productive month."

"No wonder you look like you're dying!" But something else started tugging at Esera's mind. "Wait, did you say *make* food?"

"Yes?"

"You can cook?"

"Yes? Can't you?"

This changes everything, Esera thought. Not only was this engineer also a mechanic, but he was a cook too! A mechanic-engineer-cook, she'd have to call him that in her head now. "New deal, Lieutenant. Eight hours of sleep, ten hours of work, six hours to prepare three full meals a day and take care of yourself," Esesra said. "This is not negotiable."

"Three meals? But I-"

"Non-negotiable!" Esera said, jabbing a finger at him. "You're sick of getting pushed around? *I'm* sick of ration packs and Nemoidian food. I don't know what kind of food you make, but it's Human food, and you're damn well going to make three meals a day for us plus whatever the hell Murshida eats too, okay?"

Voyan wilted under her barrage of orders. "Yes, Captain," he sighed. "But this will severely effect my repair schedule."

"You're no good to me dead, Voyan." Sensing the end of the conversation was near, Esera decided to leave on a light note. "By the way, I liked the music you had playing. Your singing could use some work, though."

The lieutenant's face flushed, his wide eyes were fixed on the floor. "Yes, Captain."

"I am surprised you found *Scimitar* so fast," Grievous said to the hologram of Esera Komara.

"It's not like I have an interstellar state *and* interstellar war to run," said Komara, shrugging. "I've got time to deal with these little things."

"The cloaking device works?"

"Yes. I've even tested it in a hostile environment."

"Bring the ship here, then. I am on Kashyyyk."

"I know," said Komara, frowning and crossing her arms. "The whole galaxy knows. What were you thinking, driving that wheel machine around in a Republic convoy? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I have faced more fearsome foes than tanks," Grievous said. "Bring *Scimitar* here. Now."

"No," said Komara. "Maul left a dark side... curse in the ship. I need time to exorcise it. It is physically impossible for me to be in there for more than eight hours."

"A curse?" asked Grievous, stroking his faceplate where his chin once was. "That is serious. Do what you must, but bring the ship here the moment it is possible."

Komara looked surprised he'd acquiesced so easily. She didn't know how dangerous curses were. Magic was respected and feared on Kalee, a curse was not something to take lightly. "Will do, Grievous," she said. "By the way, do I have permission to give out payrolls and promotions?"

"You are a captain of a ship," Grievous said. "By every law in the land. You have full right to act in that capacity."

"Law in the land?" repeated Komara.

"A phrase from my old life," said Grievous, waving his hand.

"Are your memories clearing up?"

"Bit by bit. That is not your concern, though."

"I think it is my concern. I'm only going to work for you if you can control yourself."

Grievous glared at the hologram of the former Jedi girl. "And if I couldn't?"

"I'd stop you, or die trying," said Komara. "In fact I'm certain I'd die, but I'm the one who saved you, so you're my responsibility now."

"And is Aspar your responsibility too?" asked Grievous, thinking of the Jedi she'd spared who once ordered the orbital bombardment of Shumavar. *That* remark shook Komara's confidence.

"I suppose he is, isn't he?" Komara asked herself, with a grim look. "If he goes off and murders a bunch of people again, that's blood on my hands..."

"You'd better keep him in line," Grievous said, doing his best to smile with his eyes. "Go, deal with that curse, I await you on Kashyyyk."

With that done, Grievous turned his attention to the battle at hand.

"Both wings have engaged the Republic flanks," Colonel Dassyne reported. "They've been taken by surprise, but don't yet realize the extent of this attack. Morning will reveal their folly, I'm sure." On the hologram map, two blue arrows struck from behind at the Republic lines, forming a near-circle around them.

"Just like at Qizanya," said Grievous, leaning over the map.

"Sir?" Dassyne asked.

"We attacked the huk through the forests, and trapped them near a village. Qizanya. It was like spearing fish in a net." Grievous chuckled at the memory. "Crush them, Dassyne, and I'll make you a general again."

The Koorivar's eye twitched. "They'll rue the day they ever heard my name, sir."

"Overconfidence was your weakness once," came Khan's deep mechanical voice. "Do not make that mistake again."

"I'm a far wiser man now, droid," Dassyne said, with a mocking bow. "With your leave I will depart for the front to secure our victory."

Grievous nodded. "Go."

Dassyne was almost to the exit of the room when he let out a cry of surprise, before flying backwards and hitting the holotank projecting the map. It was so bizarre that Grievous hesitated for a fraction of a second before realizing it was a Jedi's Force attack. At the speed of light, he sent out the alarm to this magnaguards and every other droid in the wroshyr tree. Eight electrostaves came to life and Grievous had out his own sabers, just as the Jedi rushed into the room.

"Grievous!" bellowed Quinlan Vos, teeth bared and eyes blazing with rage. "You're going to pay for what you did to Luminara!"

"No, I don't think I will," said Grievous, shrugging off his cape. Dassyne pushed himself up, looking bewildered, while Khan was crouched in a combat stance, totally unarmed but for his own clenched fists.

Vos's Force attack exploded out from him like a beast out of hell, his bloody scream of fury shaking the tree to its roots. Everyone but Grievous was bowled over by the force of the blast, and then Vos was on him. The man fought like a demon, howling with bloodlust, the simple viciousness and brutality of his attacks lacked any art or grace. *Ventress,* Grievous thought. *I saw this in my sparring matches with Ventress. He's using the dark side!*

"Pathetic," Grievous taunted as his droids got to their feet. "I thought the dark side was for Sith!"

"You know nothing of me!" Vos roared, but before he could strike again the magnaguards swarmed him. Grievous stepped back and let them wear him down a little more. Dassyne was out cold, but breathing, while Khan was circling around the fight, ready to attack if he had to. Again, Vos let out a blast of Force energy that seemed to emanate from his own body, but Grievous and Khan were ready for it.

Now clear, Vos leaped at Grievous, almost blind with hatred. Grievous found himself being pushed back as the dark side fueled the powerful Dark Jedi warrior's speed and strength, giving him clairvoyance enough to neutralize any blow Grievous sought to make, while remaining on the offensive. The magnaguards came at Vos again, but he just pushed them aside, intent on Grievous. *This won't be as easy as Luminara,* Grievous thought, *I need to-*

One of his hands went flying off, and with it, the saber. Yes, he was in trouble now. Vos gave him a feral grin. "You're dead, *droid*."

Grievous could only growl as his own lust for blood began to boil. They clashed again, a whirling storm of light, as Grievous called in more droids. Magnaguards, B2s, and BX-series droids came at the Dark Jedi in droves, but he just knocked them back again and again. Someone got a lucky hit on Vos, who grunted as the blaster bolt hit his shoulder blade.

"Enough!" Vos yelled, reaching out and closing his fist. Grievous felt a pressure on what remained of his organs, the same pressure he'd felt as Windu when had crushed him. Vos lifted him off the ground with the Force, and slowly began to squeeze the life out of him. This was a slow, slow way to kill, but no matter how Grievous struggled, he was stuck. *Why didn't I have a blaster built into my wrist?* he wondered, as his vision began to fade from lack of oxygen to his brain.

Then Khan attacked. The super tactical droid swooped in while all of Vos's focus on was on Grievous, and slammed a metal fist into the Dark Jedi's face. Vos stumbled back, dropping Grievous to the ground, where he gasped for breath. Khan got in four more hits to the Dark Jedi's chest and head, but Vos got his lightsaber around and slashed upwards, leaving a gash in Khan's chest plate and severing his beak and destroying his central eye. Vos would have gone for the kill, but Grievous was back on him, smashing the Dark Jedi's defenses down as he tried to recover from Khan's short but heavy beating.

But Vos was drowning in the dark side, Grievous could see the evil energy in his eyes, just like he saw it in Dooku's. The anger, the hatred, the cruelty, it was all there. Vos had Grievous on the defensive again, swinging so wildly and quickly that even Grievous's enhanced reflexes were having trouble keeping up. Another flash of light swept before his eyes, and another one of his hands fell to the floor, the glowing metal hissing as it cooled. In his moment of distraction, Grievous was bowled over by a blast of Force energy, and he felt the life being squeezed out of him again. His sabers were gone, his handles scrambled for something, *anything* that would let him carry on the fight.

Khan rose up behind the Dark Jedi, a commando droid's vibroblade raised high above his head. He brought it down on Vos, who turned just in time to cut the tip of the blade off, but the base bit into his shoulder. Vos screamed as his blood sprayed out over Khan and Grievous alike. He dropped his lightsaber as the nerves to his right arm were severed. Grievous's hand found the grip of a gun.

"It is you who dies today, Jedi," Grievous said. Vos looked up, fear at last in his eyes as he stared down the barrel of what was not the E-5 Grievous expected he grabbed, but rather an E-8 projectile launcher. Grievous pulled the trigger, and Vos was blown away.

Silence fell on the room, as computers and consoles sparked, lights flashed, and damaged droids struggled to get up. Grievous nodded to Khan, and the beak-less, two-eyed super tactical droid nodded back. A groan broke the stillness of the room, as Oro Dassyne pushed himself upright.

"What the hell did I miss?" he asked.

"We were merely disposing of the trash," said Grievous, picking up Vos's lightsaber. It wasn't a clean kill, by Kaleesh measures, but Jedi didn't fight clean. Grievous would accept Khan's help in taking down Vos. "Doctor!"

A-4D entered the chamber. "Is the Jedi dead? I don't want to lose my head again!"

"Master Vos is... resting in pieces," Grievous said, with a cackle.

"Really, master? You've spent too much time with that Obi-wan Kenobi," A-4D said.

General, Khan sent Grievous a message directly to his wireless receiver, *with your permission I will return to my ship to make repairs*.

Go ahead, Grievous told him. He left Dassyne in charge of the battle while his doctor repaired him. Two Jedi down so far in one battle, and Jedi masters at that. One had even fallen to the dark side in his eagerness to kill! So far, this campaign was going well.

Author's babbling: Here it is, the next chapter to hopefully take the vile taste of Episode IX out of your mouths! I watched a camrip and I rate it not enough Klaud/10. If you're curious about what's on Voyan's space-Ipod, it was Jja ra bba bba (Jeong Kwang-Tae) and Walking On Air (Samantha Fox). Does this mean the Korean language exists in Star Wars according to Timewatch? Yes, because Hindi exists in Star Wars according to TCW episode Dooku Captured. Shoutout to ZakoBattleDroid for making me aware the incredibly obscure E-8 projectile launcher exists, too. And yes, I hate Quinlan Vos. To hell with *Dark Disciple*, Ventress lives.

Now for something a little more serious: earlier this month it came to my attention someone was rehosting this story on AO3, with small edits, mostly fixing typos abundant in the early chapters and random bits of trivia inserted in. They did not have my permission to do this and I had the AO3 staff remove it. This person learned nothing and promptly posted it again, now claiming it was "heavily based" on my writing, despite it being nearly a word for word copy, except for those minor edits. It was removed again by my request. **Please do not rehost my writing without my permission. Please do not claim my writing as yours. And if anyone sees this happening again, just drop me a message (as one of you readers did) and I'll deal with it.** We're all losers reading and writing fanfic of a dead franchise, but at least we can be losers with dignity.

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